

Word Passages in Rites of Passage

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Tetsuo Yoshida

Golding's *Rites of Passage* (1980) has a double narrative structure, with Parson Colley's letter to his sister (pp. 186-247) inserted in the 278-page journal written by the conceited, aristocratic Talbot for his political patron. The structure sharply contrasts Talbot and Colley's character, class consciousness, and morality, but it also clearly shows their similarities. In this paper I will mainly discuss the latter feature which turns out to be closely related to their self-recognition, one of the major themes of this novel.

Talbot "going to assist the governor" of Australia and Colley representing the authority of the Church are equally particular about their appearance and their respective sense of importance as "a future Secretary of State" and as "the last and littlest soldier" of his God's "great Army." Another noteworthy similarity is the development of their keen interest in nautical terms, as shown in the italicization of the nautical terms used in their respective accounts of events in the ship to the peer patron and the devoted sister.

This similar interest leads to both Talbot and Colley's fond use of polysemantic puns of words with nautical meanings. Talbot, for example, uses "board" and "main course" when he has sex with Zenobia, while Colley uses "anchor" when he refers to Christ as someone who confers security. Parson Colley labels this activity "paranomasia." When he refers to the ship as "the strange construction of English oak which both transports and imprisons me!" he adds, "I am aware, of course, of the amusing 'paranomasia' in the word 'transport.'" Colley's verbal play with "transport" eventually comes back to haunt him with its sexual connotation when he cries

“Joy! Joy! Joy!” in front of the passengers and officers just after he has enjoyed fellatio with the handsome sailor Billy Rogers. The cry, which reminds us of Kurtz’s “The horror! The horror!” in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, suggests that the parson has recognized something non-religious and unfamiliar within himself.

Golding himself makes paronomasian use of the word “passage.” When Talbot writes “my passage to the other side of the world” and that the ship is “crossing the equator,” the passage has a territorial meaning. Nevertheless, the word has a social implication when Golding writes that the two young British gentlemen cross “the white line” at the mainmast that “separates the social orders.” When Talbot and Colley make love to Zenobia and Billy respectively, “passage” can be defined as “an amorous encounter,” and such a passage may be called a “physical passage.” The passage which the two heroes make throughout the novel is a passage of self-discovery which can be called a “spiritual passage” in the “floating society.”